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Teacher Testing: Advice for Faculty in Literature, Rhetoric, and Creative Writing

Betsy A. Bowen

It is 7:30 on a gray Saturday morning in January when I pull into the Bassick High School parking lot. There are enough cars in the parking lot to tell me I am in the right place, but I can't find a way to get in. Two doors are locked; another has no handles on the outside. This is not the way I usually spend weekend mornings during holiday break. In my briefcase are my registration form and well-sharpened number 2 pencils. It has been twenty-five years since I last took a test administered by ETS, but I still know the drill.

Half an hour later I am registered and sitting in a classroom with about twenty other test-takers, three of them my own students. We are all here to take the Praxis II exam, "English Language, Literature, and Composition: Content Knowledge." This is a two-hour multiple choice exam with questions on American, British, and world literature, literary terms, grammar and usage, and teaching. A second test required of prospective English teachers in Connecticut—a two-hour essay exam on literary analysis and pedagogical issues—will be administered later in the day. Of the forty-three states that require teachers to pass tests to attain certification, thirty-five—80%—require some form of the Praxis Series (ETS, 2001).

I am here because I want to know more about the test my students take. My students are here because they need to pass it. About fifteen percent of the English majors at the small, comprehensive university where I teach minor in secondary education. I work informally with them and serve as the English Department's liaison to the University's Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions. Every other year I teach "Advanced Composition for Secondary School Teachers," one of the courses required for the education minor. My colleagues in the English Department were relieved, I think, when I took over this role. While my four years as a high

school Latin and English teacher had given me a strong interest in K-12 issues, no one in my Department, including me, has had any training in teacher preparation. Instead, our training is in literary studies, rhetoric, and creative writing—a profile that makes my Department similar to departments in many small, private institutions. Yet we are the ones responsible for preparing students in the subject area that they will soon teach. With little advice or direction from our colleagues in the School of Education, we are left to think about teacher preparation on our own. To be honest, we often do not think about it; we assume that the courses and requirements that make a good English major also make a good secondary school English teacher. When our students fail the Praxis exams—and too many do—we do not know what they need.

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"Please turn the answer sheet over and fill in the information requested on the top left hand side of your sheet. Do not proceed until you are instructed to do so." When I have finished squeezing letters into grids, I study the self-consciously upbeat posters on the walls. I can afford to be nonchalant, even ironic about this morning. The only thing at stake for me is some pride. (With a Ph.D. in rhetoric and thirteen years of experience teaching English in college, I still wonder if ETS will pronounce me unfit to teach.) My students and, I assume, all the other test-takers have their careers at stake.

"You may now break the seal on your test." We begin. For an hour and a half I fill in circles on my answer sheet: *Billy Budd*; synecdoche; squash, muskrat, and skunk; third person limited omniscient; Hurston and Hughes. For one question I have to select the best summary of a given poem; for another, to identify the most apt paraphrase of a line from the poem. One question asks me to identify the work of literature alluded to in a passage of literary criticism. Another requires me to identify the type of grammatical error in a given sentence. (I cannot reveal the questions themselves; test takers are required to sign a pledge agreeing to keep test information confidential.) The questions cover canonical and contemporary literature, literary terms, grammar and usage, the history of the language, and, to a limited extent, pedagogy. (ETS identifies the relative weight of the areas tested in the exam as: American literature, 20%; British and other literature, 15%; literary forms and devices, 10%; language/linguistics, 25%; and composition/rhetoric, 30%.) One hundred-fifty questions in all—a little more than a question a minute.

I finish early but cannot leave; we already have been told that no one may leave the room until the end of the test period. I worry about my students who are still working. Every blank circle on the answer sheet will reduce their scores. If our education minors' past performance is any indication, I know that at least one of my three students is unlikely to pass this test.

Passing the Praxis II exam in English in Connecticut is relatively difficult; the passing score set by the state is higher than that of almost any other state. Connecticut also has relatively high student achievement; on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national assessment conducted periodically since 1969, Connecticut fourth-graders led the nation in reading (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1999, p.10). Whether this level of achievement is due to the state's relatively high standards for teachers or whether it reflects the fact that Connecticut has the nation's highest median income (Kelley, 1999) is open for debate. Despite the state's high median income, significant and troubling gaps still remain between the achievement levels of Connecticut's largely minority, urban students and students throughout the rest of the state, gaps that mirror those found around the nation (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2001).

Finally, exactly two hours after we began, the test ends. We pass in our answer sheets and exam booklets and are free to go. Six weeks later, I open the envelope from ETS: 200 out of a possible 200. Gratifying, yes, even though this is an exam designed to assess beginning teachers. And I know a little bit more about what my students need to know to pass this exam, but I still feel underprepared to ensure that our teacher education candidates have the subject matter knowledge they will need to pass the certification exams and teach in secondary schools.

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To be honest, the relationship between success on certification exams and effectiveness in the classroom is uncertain. Knowledge of subject matter seems to be related to successful teaching, but whether certification exams can adequately and fairly assess that knowledge has not been established. Proponents of subject matter exams claim that these tests assure that teachers have mastered essentials of the discipline that they teach and are a prerequisite for improving public education in the United States. Such tests, they note, are used in other professions including law, medicine, architecture, and accounting. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2001), for instance, claims that licensure exams now in use are, in fact, too easy and

that the Praxis exam (at least for elementary level certification) is so saturated with "progressive education ideologies" as to be unreliable. Even portfolios such as those developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, are, according to the NCTQ, too often "an attempt to avoid evidence of poor subject-area preparation" (p. 2).

Most proponents recognize that good teaching requires more than any test of subject matter knowledge can assess. States that employ certification tests also place other requirements on teaching candidates such as completing an approved teacher education program or student teaching. Even the ETS, which administers the Praxis exams, identifies these tests as just "one component" of a teaching licensing system, albeit a "vital" one (ETS, 2001).

Opponents of certification exams, however, argue that high-stakes testing of subject matter knowledge is unreliable and not demonstrably related to good teaching. FairTest (2001), for example, asserts that "there is no evidence to support the claim that standardized tests predict who will be a good teacher" (p. 1). Moreover, critics contend, tests that serve as gateways to professions too often are discriminatory in either intent or effect, rewarding those who have knowledge or experience not necessarily related to the position they seek. Bob Schaeffer (1996), writing for FairTest, calls such tests "racist and sexist," saying they result in "huge numbers of people of color failing as compared to whites and a larger percentage of women flunking the test than males" (p. 3). (For a fuller discussion of legal issues raised by teacher testing and discrimination claims, see Mertz, 1990.) The Conference on English Education is one group that has opposed high-stakes teacher testing and has advocated "balanced, equitable, authentic teacher candidate assessments that make use of multiple measures" (NCTE, 2000, p. 80).

Such multiple measures, however, are harder to design, more expensive to administer, and not necessarily immune from legal challenges. To design a good exam of English, for example, one would need to consider both content and epistemology—that is, both what one needs to know and what it means to know in this field. Both of those would be—in fact, already are—highly contested. Moreover, there is little incentive for commercial testing organizations to develop such complex and labor-intensive measures, even with the 2.5 million new teachers who will be needed in the ten-year period between 1999 and 2009 (American Council on Education, 1999, p. 8). And in a time of more austere federal budgets, it seems unlikely that federal or state governments are ready to commit funds on the scale that would be needed.

Whatever the outcome of this debate about teacher testing, prospective English teachers rely on us, the faculty in English departments, to pro-

vide them with the subject-matter knowledge they will need. Yet few of us in English departments are trained to do so. Some are fortunate enough to work closely and effectively with the department or school of education at their institution. Too many of us are not. In fact, the recent report to college presidents by the American Council of Education (ACE) identifies this departmental insularity as a major problem, one result of which is that subject matter of prospective teachers has received insufficient attention. The report argues that "the responsibility for preparing prospective teachers in the subject area they will teach rests not only with school of education faculty but also with faculty of the institution as a whole—especially the arts and sciences faculty" (p. 28). If colleges and universities take ACE's report seriously, those of us in literary studies, rhetoric, and creative writing will need to play a greater role in preparing secondary school teachers.

Yet when we look for direction on teacher preparation to our disciplinary organizations, the Modern Language Association (MLA) and NCTE's Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), we do not always find the information or support we need. With over 30,000 members the MLA is the most powerful organization shaping English departments in American colleges and universities. It recently has recognized the need for qualified secondary school teachers of English and foreign languages and the responsibility of college English and foreign language departments for their development. Still, teacher preparation is so far from the MLA's traditional purview, and the regulations that govern certification are so varied and quickly changing, that the MLA struggles to catch up. In its major work on K-12 teacher preparation, *Preparing a Nation's Teachers* (Franklin, 1999), only two of the book's twenty-two chapters are devoted to assessment. Most of the material in those two chapters concerns teachers' assessment of their students; only a single page (in the chapter by White and White) is devoted to the assessment of teachers. Similarly, at the special mini-workshop on the undergraduate English major and teacher preparation sponsored by the MLA at the 1999 NCTE convention, teacher testing received little attention. Of the MLA's 128 discussion groups and divisions that serve the scholarly and teaching interests of members, four are concerned with aspects of teaching, but none specifically addresses the preparation of teachers for secondary and elementary schools. In short, the MLA, while well intentioned, is not yet ready to lead college English departments in preparing prospective English teachers for our K-12 schools.

The National Council of Teachers of English, by contrast, is clearly a major force in teacher education. NCTE sponsors the Conference on English Education (CEE), an association dedicated to the education of English

language arts teachers. Members of CEE include "teacher educators, curriculum supervisors, school and district administrators, researchers, and graduate students" (NCTE, 2000, p. 77). (Significantly, this description of members does not specifically name teachers or scholars of literature. Although faculty in teacher education and in literature both work with prospective teachers, we are seldom members of the same professional organizations.) CEE sponsors this journal, *English Education,* and the CEE Commission on Teacher Candidate Assessment. It has worked with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and NCTE to review teacher education programs in English and language arts. In addition, NCTE also sponsors a Standing Committee on Teacher Preparation and Certification, one of its fourteen commissions or standing committees. The Committee was established "to uphold appropriate professional standards for teacher certification" (NCTE, 2000, p. 41) and to work with NCTE and CEE on standards for teacher training programs and certification.

CCCC, in contrast, has a much wider charge, namely to discuss "questions related to the development and teaching of college composition and communications courses, including questions relating to theory, research, and pedagogy" (NCTE, 2000, p. 75). Certainly, members of CCCC teach the courses on language and rhetoric that prospective teachers need, but teacher education is only a small part of CCCC's mission. In recent years other issues—ranging from post-colonialism, to service learning, to the casualization of English faculty—have been more prominent. (See Alsup, 2001, for a discussion of misunderstandings between faculty in rhetoric and composition and those in English education.) Moreover, with 9,559 members, CCCC is less than one-third the size of the MLA and less than half as long established. It is, in consequence, far less influential than the MLA in most college and university English departments. Thus, it seems clear to me that if we want to ensure that prospective English teachers have the deep and broad knowledge of English that they will need, we need to work effectively with colleagues in literary studies.

With these gaps in institutional and professional support, English departments in schools like mine may want to ignore the debates about teacher testing and leave all aspects of teacher preparation to schools or departments of education. Donald Gray (1999) of the MLA offers reasons for not doing so. He writes:

> Why should faculties in English and foreign language departments accept the education of teachers as one of their responsibilities? The reasons are political, social, economic, and professional. . . . English and the foreign

> languages are our subjects. We are in some measure responsible for how they exist in secondary schools and for making accessible the economic, social, and intellectual benefits they promise. (p. 8)

Gray argues that when we, the members of English departments, engage ourselves more fully with teacher preparation, we benefit in several ways. We learn more about our subject area and about teaching, he writes, and we make more apparent to an often critical public the value of what we do. Helping prospective teachers gain entry into the profession is one part of our responsibility. To do that, we need to learn more about certification tests ourselves. Without more information we cannot ensure that our students have the knowledge and intellectual skills that they need to begin teaching.

Certainly we may object to these tests; better yet, we may press state accreditation agencies to improve them. But we cannot ignore them.

Some English faculty may argue certification exams such as the Praxis II are fundamentally incompatible with our sense of what is important in language and literary studies at the college level. They maintain that we should have nothing to do with tests that reduce the study of language and literature to the recall of disparate facts. Certainly we may object to these tests; better yet, we may press state accreditation agencies to improve them. But we cannot ignore them. Public dissatisfaction with American education is so widespread that teacher testing is likely to become even more prominent in the next few years. Testing prospective teachers' knowledge of the subject areas they will teach seems to much of the public like a simple and relatively inexpensive way to improve schools. Whatever the shortcomings of these tests, an increasing number of our college students will need to pass them, and we cannot assist those students in preparing for the tests—or make effective arguments against them—if we do not educate ourselves about them.

For our own sake we must do this soon. Title II of the 1998 Higher Education Act requires that colleges and universities with education programs annually report information on the effectiveness of their teacher programs, including their certification rates. In April 2002, the Secretary of Education will present the first of these state-by-state "report cards" on teacher preparation to Congress and the nation. All stakeholders—prospective students, faculty members, trustees, and legislators—will be able to see at a glance information about how well an institution's teacher education program is preparing prospective teachers for their careers. While this information may stimulate greater interest in teacher preparation, it also may

lead state legislators and trustees—people with little or no expertise in our subject area—to intervene in our curriculum if results are low.

As faculty members in English, we have too much at stake to allow that to happen. We need to determine ourselves how we can best meet the needs of all our majors, including those who plan to teach. Doing so may require that we press academic administrators at our institutions for the resources that make possible meaningful and sustained cooperation between English and education departments. (The recent report by the American Council of Education to presidents on their responsibility for improving teacher education programs may help in that effort.) It also may require pressing our disciplinary organizations—the MLA and CCCC—to give greater attention to teacher preparation. In its report on teacher education, the American Association of State Colleges and University (1999) declared that "the preparation of teachers is the responsibility of the entire campus" (p. 40); it is time for those of us in literature, rhetoric, and creative writing to exercise our part of that responsibility more knowledgeably.

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Call for Papers

If writing teachers become writers who teach, or if writers become writing teachers, what happens? What is the interplay in the shadows, the meaning of the thin slash between the writer/teacher, teacher/writer? How does this dual role not only change the instruction, but also change the instructor? We are seeking personal essays from a wide range of writers and teachers in secondary, community college, and university classrooms to be published in a collection tentatively titled *Intersections.* We are particularly interested in contributions from contingent faculty, from those who write/teach professional or technical writing, and from those who teach in contexts outside the traditional classroom. How does the role of writer parallel—and juxtapose—the role of teacher? How does it deepen or shift teachers' sense of themselves and their respective professions? What are the dangers of combining the two roles? We want to hear the voices of those who followed the call of writing—not giving up teaching, but working to hold both worlds of writing and teaching in delicate balance, using one to play off the other. Send essays or inquiries by June 5, 2002, to Kay Harley, Department of English, Saginaw Valley State University, 7400 Bay Road, University Center, MI 48710. E-mail: khh@ svsu.edu; or to Helen Raica-Klotz. E-mail: raicaklotz@home.com.
